

Louisville's Homeless Women Through the Eyes of Homeless Connect 2008 - 2012

This report is a snapshot of the population of homeless women in Louisville. Using five years of data compiled by OFW from interviews with homeless women attending Homeless Connect, many observations are reported about the status of Louisville's homeless women, trends in needs and access to services, as well as their self-identified cause of homelessness.

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December 2012

For the past 12 years, the Robley Rex Veterans Affairs Medical Center and Louisville Metro Community Services and Revitalization, along with partners from numerous community service organizations have come together for Stand Down/ Homeless Connect. In past years the two organizations held separate events for Louisville's homeless, but since the partnership, Homeless Connect has become the largest provider event for the homeless and helped thousands of Louisville's homeless address their needs before winter. Since 2008, the Office For Women has participated in the event. OFW has had the opportunity to interview homeless women who attend the event, thanks to their willingness to be open about their current living situations. Using data gathered over the past five years, OFW has been able to generate information regarding the population of homeless women in Louisville.



Factors in Interpreting Longitudinal Data

When looking at the factors that affect homelessness, the economy is at the top of the list. In 2010, the economy was at its worst, with an unemployment rate at over 10%. The following information will take the economy into consideration when explaining the rates of job loss, insufficient income, eviction rates, and other variables the women reported as being a cause for their homelessness.

When looking at the specific data OFW gathered over the years, there are some variables to note. First, the Office For Women began surveying women in 2008 using a short survey which contained general, open-ended questions. Over the past few years the questions have continued to grow, and OFW has developed multiple choice options to better define data from the answers – options are now easier to identify and the survey is more time efficient. However, women still have the option of writing in their comments. Second, in 2011, Homeless Connect was held at St. Anne's Dismas Charities Campus – which is not the usual location (Salvation Army on S. Brook Street) where recent Homeless Connect events have been held. The number of attendees was lower in 2011, and there were fewer women who attended the event that year. OFW was still able to interview a good number of homeless women despite this fact.

In 2010, OFW began gauging the number of women who attended Homeless Connect on a consistent basis, by asking them if they had previously attended the event. Over the years, 2010, 2011, and 2012 only an average of (12%) had previously attended Homeless Connect. Eighty-eight percent of the women interviewed during those years were first time attendees. 2011 showed the highest number of new attendees, with (97.5%) never having attended the event before. 2012 showed the highest number of return attendees, with (19%) of the women having attended the event previously. It is important to note this, because the surveys are not given to the same women each year and only those women who attend Homeless Connect and are willing to participate in the survey are considered in the data.

What do you think was the main reason you became homeless?

One of the most informative questions asked of women at Homeless Connect was to identify the main reason leading to their homelessness. During the 2008 surveys, half of the women provided more than one reason, as the question was open-ended. This is evident from the high percentages in the year 2008. Women surveyed in other years continued to identify more than one reason as the main reason for homelessness showing that a culmination of issues lead to homelessness. OFW has continued to independently count each of the answers identified. In representing the data concerning the main reason women became homeless, the answers have been separated into two charts that relate to categories. The first being income/housing issue related, and the second being factors such as substance abuse and family issues/divorce.

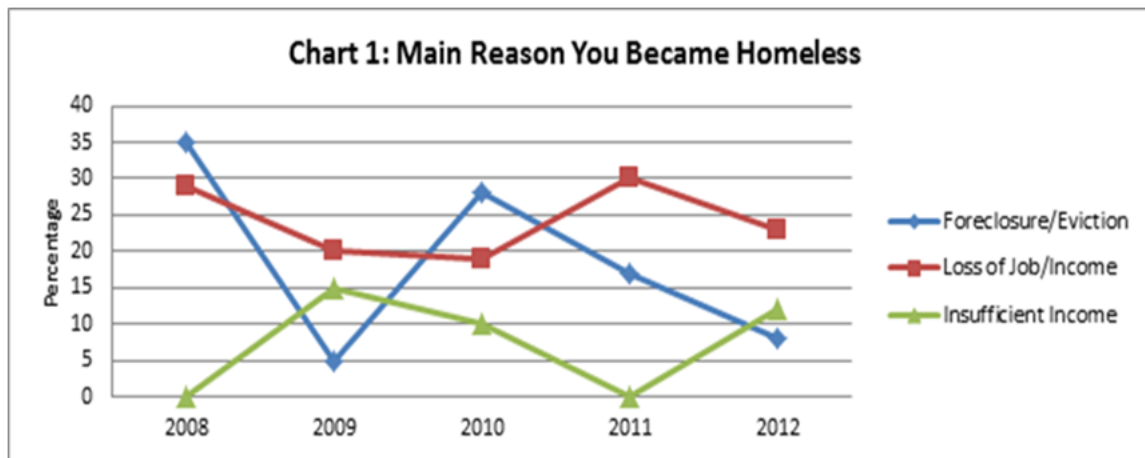


Chart 1, shows “Loss of Job” and “Insufficient Income” as almost mirror images of one another. When “Loss of Job” was at its highest in 2008 and 2011, “Insufficient Income” was at its lowest with no one reporting “Insufficient Income” as a main reason for their homelessness in these years. “Foreclosure/Eviction” from the home was highest during the years 2008 and 2010.

In 2009 there was a major drop in this category, with only a small number stating it as a main reason for their homelessness. Louisville’s Metropolitan Housing Coalition found ([Louisville Foreclosure Recovery](#) report) an increase in foreclosures during 2009 . However, there seems to be no direct correlation between “Foreclosure/Evictions” women reported and the general rates reported in the past five years. The women’s circumstances may have been influenced by other factors such as the 2009 “moratorium” when many lenders agreed to temporarily suspend foreclosure actions and evictions.



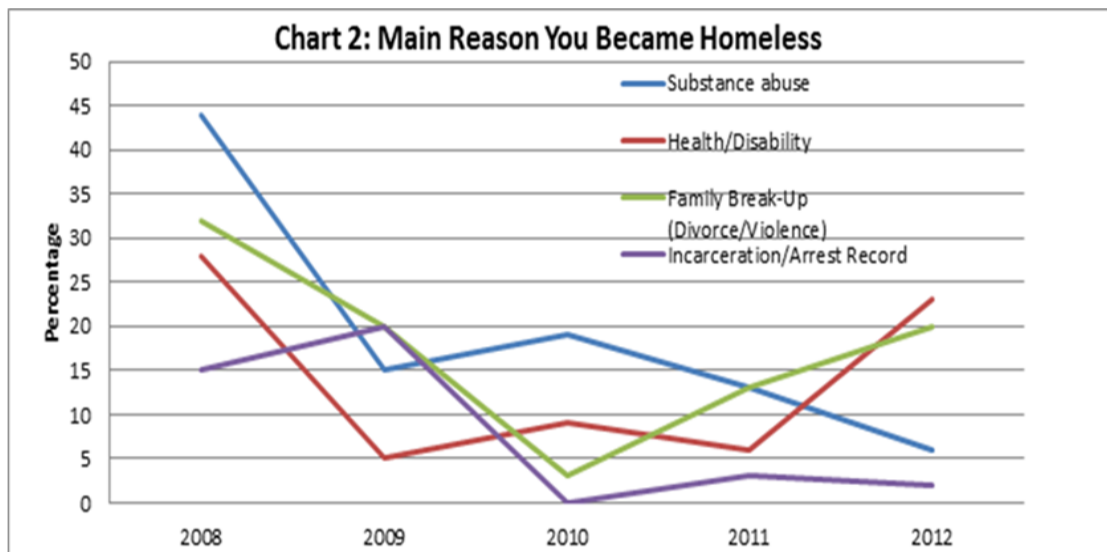


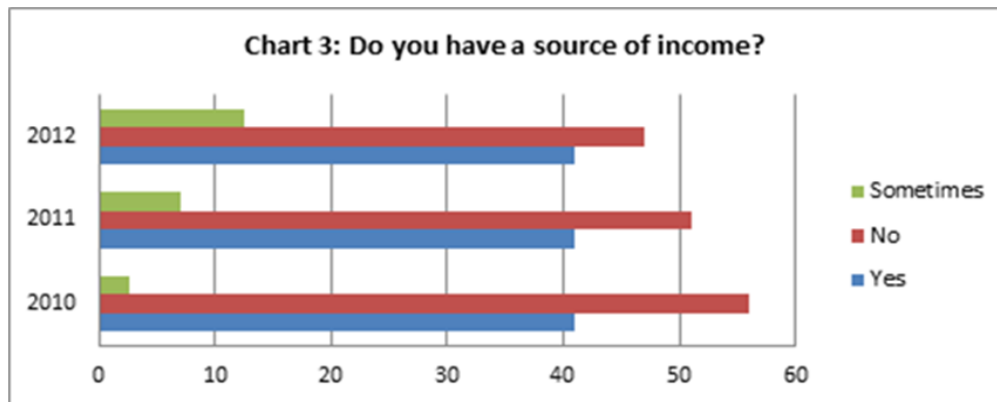
Chart 2, shows four other reasons women identified as leading to their homelessness. “Substance Abuse”, “Health/Disability”, “Family Break-Up/Divorce”, and “Incarceration/Arrest Record” are the categories. In 2008, the main reason for homelessness reported was “Substance Abuse” at (44%). Even though 2009 saw an almost 30% decrease in reporting “Substance Abuse” as the main reason for homelessness and the response trend is downward, it was reported as the main reason for homelessness again in 2010. “Substance Abuse” continues to decline as the main cause of homelessness and in 2012 was one of the least often reported causes of homelessness.

In 2010, the main reason reported for homelessness was “Family Break-Up/Divorce” at (17%) and “Incarceration/Arrest Record” at (17%). In 2008, the percentage of women who reported “Incarceration/Arrest Record” was (15%) and it rose slightly to its highest level at (17%) in 2009. “Incarceration/Arrest Record” has been reported at very small rates since the year 2009, between 0 and (3%).

“Family Break-Up/Divorce” was reported at its highest, during 2008 with (32%) and fell steeply during the years 2009 and 2010, with only (4%) of women reporting “Family Break-Up/Divorce” as the main reason for their homelessness. This corresponds to national and international reports of divorce rates falling during the worst of the recession.

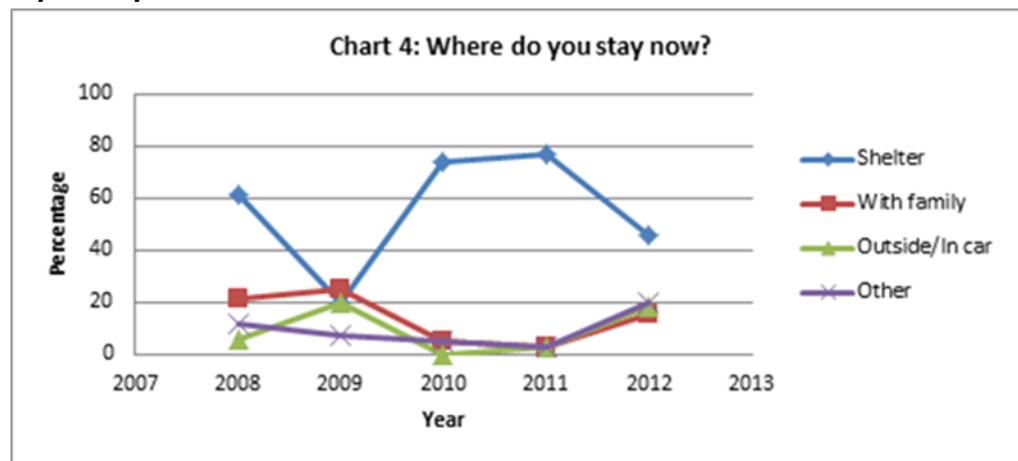
Since 2010, however, family issues have been on the rise as the main cause of homelessness women reported. In 2012, the percent rose to (20%), the highest since 2008. “Health/Disability” show up as an inconsistent factor in homelessness. During 2008, about 27% of the women reported their health or disability as the main reason for their homelessness. During the next three years the percentages fell between 5% and 10%. A rise was seen in 2012 when 23% reported it as the main cause of their homelessness; the highest percent since 2008.

Do you have a source of income?



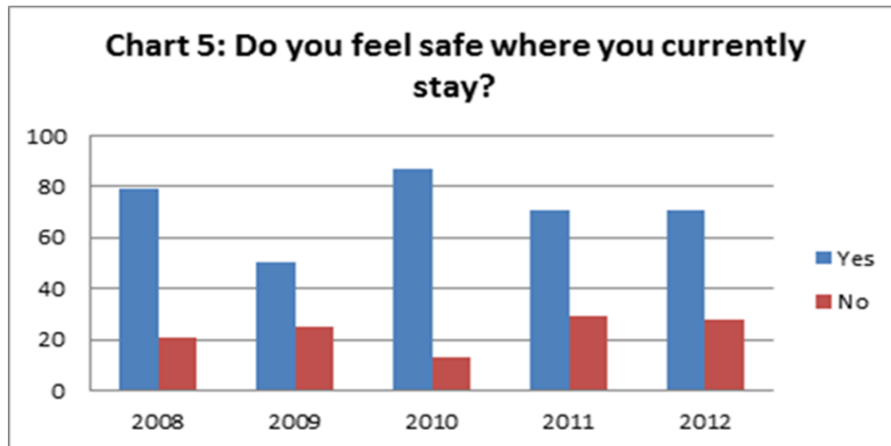
During each year, (41%) of women answered that they had a consistent source of income. However, they did not have a home of their own, even with their source of income. During these years, the number of women who “sometimes” had income increased. In 2010, only (2.6%) had income “sometimes,” in 2011, the number rose to (7%). This year, 2012, a percentage of women almost five times greater than in 2010 reported having a source of income “sometimes” (12.5%). Therefore, **Chart 3** also shows a slight decline in the number of women who said they had no source of income at all. This can be attributed to the increase in the “Sometimes” category.

Where do you stay now?



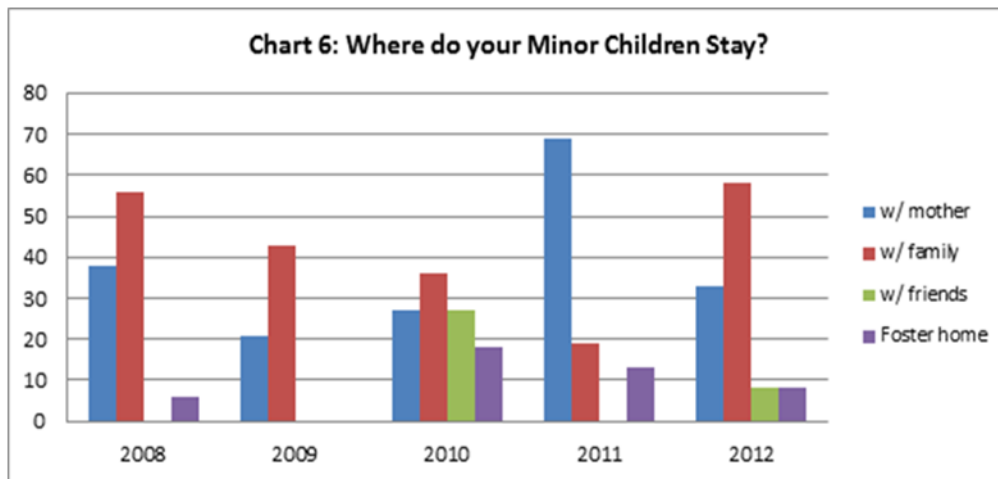
A shelter was the place most reported by women as where they currently stayed. The exception being 2009 when only (20%) reported staying in shelters. In 2009, many women reported staying with “Family” (25%) and “Outside/In car” (20%). The years 2010 and 2011 were the years most women reported staying in shelters, with approximately 75% staying in shelters these two years. When the economy was at its worst (see **Chart 3**) more than (50%) of the women surveyed had no source of income. That number went decreased in 2012 to (46%), when more women once again began staying with “Family” and “Outside/In car.” 2012 was also the year highest for the answer of “Other,” (20%) of women did not report where they were currently staying.

Do you feel safe where you currently stay?



The year with the smallest percentage of women reporting feeling safe where they stay was 2009 when only (51%) reported feeling safe. According to **Chart 4**, in 2009 the majority of women, (25%), were staying with their family; while 40% were staying in a shelter or outside/ in car, in equal proportions, (20%) each. Women reported feeling more safe in years such as 2010, when (75%) were staying in shelters and the number of women who did not feel safe was at its lowest rate, (13%.) This may indicate women felt less safe staying in other places, including with their family.

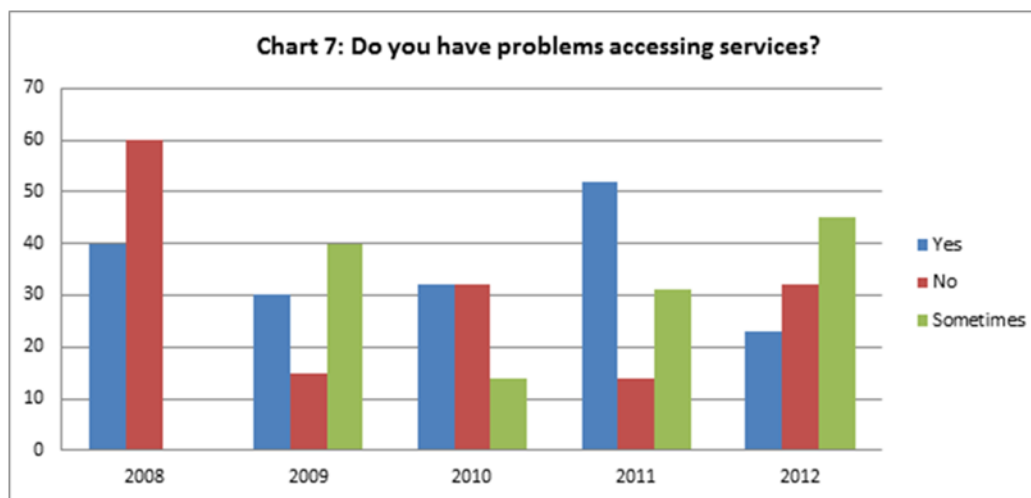
Where do your minor children stay?



More than half (57%) of the women interviewed over the last five years, had minor children. Women were asked where their minor children stayed while they themselves were homeless. Women most often reported that their minor children stayed with family. This is the case every year except 2011, when (69%) of women reported their children were staying with them.

According to **Chart 4**, in 2011, about (75%) of homeless women were staying in shelters, meaning that many children were also living in shelters in 2011. In the year 2010 there was a significant rise in women reporting their children staying in foster homes, (18%). There was a decline in 2011 to (13%), but 2010 and 2011 were the years highest for women reporting their children staying in foster homes. The number of children staying with friends also rose in 2010 to (27%). This had been reported in 2008 as a small percentage, (6%) and was not reported in 2011, but was reported at (8%) in 2012.

Do you have problems accessing services?



A concern of OFW is access to services by homeless women. The inability of women to receive services they need affects their ability to move out of shelters or off the streets. It is important that Service Providers adequately inform women of their options and that those services are easy to navigate.

In 2008, (60%) of the women interviewed reported they did not experience barriers to accessing services. Although this is more than half, it means (40%) of women interviewed were having “problems” accessing services. In 2009, “Sometimes” was the most reported answer for women about problems accessing services, while (30%) responded “Yes” to “Do you have problems accessing services.” While responses in 2010 show “Sometimes” declined as a response, women reported in equal percentages (33%) problems accessing services and not having problems accessing services.

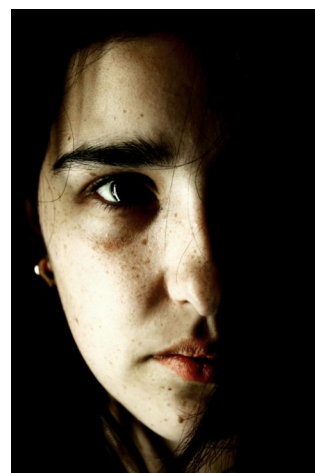
In 2011, there was a significant increase of approximately (20%) in problems accessing services. 2011 is the year the largest percentage of women reported difficulty accessing services. According to **Chart 4**, in 2011, (76%) of the women interviewed were staying at shelters. The primary reason women cited in 2011 for becoming homeless was “Loss of Job/Income” (**Chart 1**).



Responses indicate navigating services related to employment is difficult because of the need for transportation. In four of the five survey years, responses indicated Transportation was the greatest unmet need. It was observed that fewer employment related opportunities at Homeless Connect were available than services related to substance abuse or family issues, such as domestic violence. The women interviewed in 2012, reported significantly lower “Yes” response when asked about problems accessing services than the previous year. However, “Sometimes” was reported by about (45%) of the women interviewed. “Health/Disability” was the main reason women reported for becoming homeless in 2012, according to **Chart 2**. This is a more inconsistent need. Unless it is a chronic illness, the individual may not always be looking for services. **Chart 8** also shows that women were most often informed about Homeless Connect through their Service Provider, therefore, Service Providers may be relaying more information to their clients about services. But the homeless population and relay of information may not be consistent; which would result in the rise in “Sometimes” responses.

What needs do you have that are not being met?

Each year reflects the varied needs women have which are not being met. For the year 2008 the three main needs women reported were: “Housing”, “Transportation”, and “Employment.” Housing and Transportation at (39%) were the highest priority of need. The year 2009 shows “Transportation”, as being most needed, followed by “Employment” and “Food Stamps”. In 2010, “Transportation” was once again reported as the highest need, with “Job Searches” next, and the last need not being met was access to “Food Stamps”. Years 2011 and 2012 show an increase in the needs for both “Medical/Disability Assistance,” simply, “Money” and “Child Care.” However, “Housing” was most needed in 2011 with the majority (39%) of women reporting housing as a need that is not being met, followed by “Employment” and “Medical” with (17%) and finally, Transportation (11%). The year 2012, followed the trend of “Transportation” being most needed with (47%), “Medical” was the next need reported at (16%), followed by “Employment” with (10%).

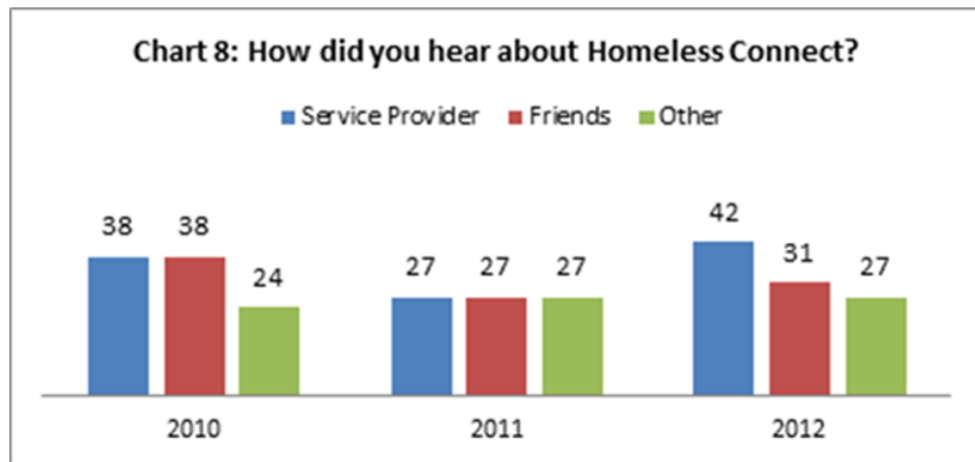


Data concerning the Homeless Connect

In 2010, OFW began asking questions about Homeless Connect itself. Two of the questions asked were: “How did you hear about Homeless Connect?” and “What did you expect to find?” The responses to these question help OFW understand who is talking about the event and what women are looking for when they decide to attend Homeless Connect. Using this information, OFW can assist the Homeless Connect Planning Committee and Service Providers in assessing whether efforts to inform the homeless about the event are successful; whether people who are outside the walls of Service Providers are talking about the event; and what attendees expect to find, so that adjustments can be made in future years to better accommodate the needs of homeless women.

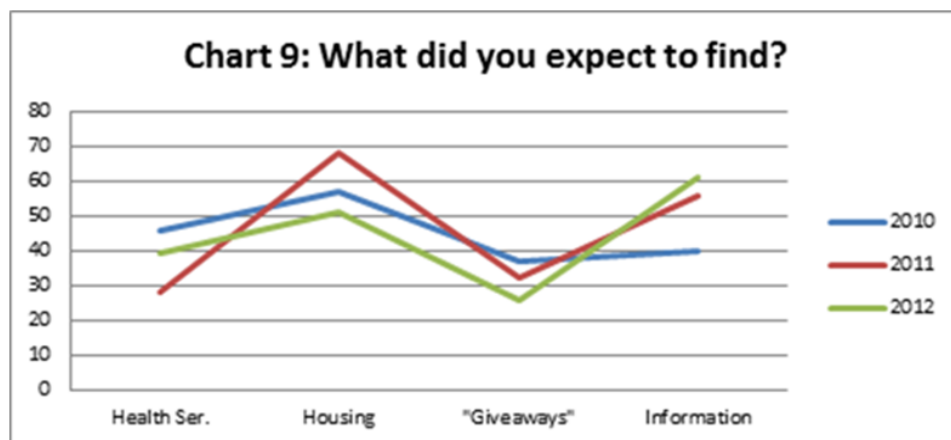
How did you hear about the Homeless Connect?

The three options for answering “How did you hear about Homeless Connect?” were: “Service Provider,” “Friends,” and “Other.” In 2010, “Service Provider” and “Friends” were both at 38%. In 2011, responses in each category equaled (27%) —(Homeless Connect was hosted by Dismas Charities at a different location further away). In 2012, “Service Provider” was the most frequent answer, 42%. “Friends” received 31% and “Other” received 27%. Service Providers were very effective at advertising Homeless Connect this year and it was held at the usual location. Many women stated the Service Provider which had introduced the event to them, including The Center for Women and Families, Hotel Louisville, and Choices.



What did you expect to find at the Homeless Connect?

The question “What did you expect to find?” provided participants with four multiple choice options, as well as “Other.” The four options include, “Housing” “Information” “Health Services” and “Giveaways” Consistently over the past three years, more than 50% of the women were looking for “Housing”. “Health Services” in high demand in 2010 at 46%, fell to 28% in 2011, and was on the rise in 2012 with 39%. The need for “Information” has been steadily growing over the past three years. In the years 2010 and 2012 “Giveaways” ranked the lowest in priority of all the options, and in 2011, it ranked four percentage points above the lowest.



Conclusions

OFW has been able to generate this data, thanks to the openness of homeless women who attended Homeless Connect and took the time to be interviewed. The survey sample used for these results does not represent the homeless community as a whole or all of Louisville's homeless women. Information goes out to the homeless community primarily through service providers who are informed about the event and help spread the word. Over 100 women attend Homeless Connect event each year, and OFW is able to interview 20-30% of those women. Five years of data gathered from Homeless Connect interviews shed light on the homeless women living in Louisville who responded to Homeless Connect outreach efforts.

Significant findings from the interviews are :

- Substance abuse as self-reported has fallen significantly since 2008 as the main cause of homelessness, while Loss of Job/Income was the most consistent cause of homelessness.
- Each year, the percentage of women with an inconsistent income has increased; the percentage reporting no income has decreased.
- Shelters were the most common place homeless women stay.
- In the five years of interviews, 50—87% of the women felt safe where they were staying.
- The minor children of homeless women most often stayed with family members, except 2011 when most children were with their mother.
- Accessing services is problematic for homeless women.
- Transportation was the most reported unmet need of homeless women.
- Service Providers were essential to informing homeless women about the Homeless Connect.
- Each year, women reported “Information” at an increased rate as what they expected to find at the event, while “Housing” remained the most consistently reported.